



HEADS ABOVE WATER: LEAGUE CITY IS LEADING THE CHARGE AGAINST EXTREME FLOODING

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League City City Manager John Baumgartner secured regional partners to help fund studies and projects aimed at alleviating regional flooding.

In Texas, everything is bigger—including the rainfall. In 2017, the world looked on in shock when Hurricane Harvey's torrential rains damaged nearly 200,000 properties within Harris and Galveston counties. The record-breaking storm inundated the region with more than one trillion gallons of rainwater.

The storm's devastation was impossible for regional leaders to ignore. Citizens were hurting and frustrated. Solutions couldn't be kicked down the road for later discussion. However, the complexity of the task—mitigating flooding in a hurricane-prone coastal region with a population of over seven million people—seemed insurmountable.

League City—located halfway between Houston and Galveston—was particularly hard hit, with rainfall totals near 50 inches. As residents picked up the soggy pieces of their flood-damaged homes, they looked to local leaders for answers. In late 2018, League City councilmembers responded to the pains of their constituents. Understanding the flooding issue needed to be addressed on a large scale, the city council tasked League City City Manager John Baumgartner to explore regional solutions.

Due to its location within both the Clear Creek and Dickinson Bayou watersheds, Baumgartner understood that League City could not feasibly mitigate flooding without assistance from neighboring communities. These expansive watersheds encompass more than 300-square-miles—spanning several cities and counties—and riverine flooding from rainfall affects more than half a million people within the watershed areas.

The projects necessary to create real improvements within the two watersheds could easily exceed the \$1 billion range. Simply put, the financial burden of consequential flood mitigation was too great for one city to bear on its own. The task necessitated teamwork. Not to be deterred, League City leaders rose to the occasion and faced these hurdles head on.

First, Baumgartner approached engineering consultants Freese and Nichols to discuss a scope of services for a project of this scale. They then spent the next several months speaking with stakeholders throughout both watersheds.

"We knew this would be a tremendous undertaking. One community could not do it by themselves. The financial impact would be significant in order to create solutions that would provide any material difference in flood levels in the creek," said Baumgartner. "The issues in both watersheds are regional, and it's important we are all on the same page and not implementing projects that negatively impact each other."



League City Councilmembers Larry Millican (left) & Hank Dugie (right) both chaired regional watershed committees soon after Hurricane Harvey.

Baumgartner successfully secured partnerships with the cities of Friendswood, Pearland, Dickinson, Nassau Bay, Webster, Galveston County, Brazoria Drainage District, Harris County Flood Control District, Galveston County Consolidated Drainage District, and the United States Army Corps of Engineers (USACE).

After forming a coalition of regional stakeholders, a comprehensive study was launched to identify watershed vulnerabilities and create data-driven solutions. The \$1.5 million Lower Clear Creek and Dickinson Bayou Watershed study kicked off in November 2019 and wrapped up in spring of 2021. The effort was only possible due to shared funding by regional partners.

Once completed, the study provided the data needed to recommend a suite of projects that could be implemented

throughout the region. While some projects are finally preparing to kick off—like the construction of regional detention ponds and bypass channels—other large-scale projects won't begin for several more years. They require significant funding that can only be obtained through large grants, cost-matching, and federal programs.

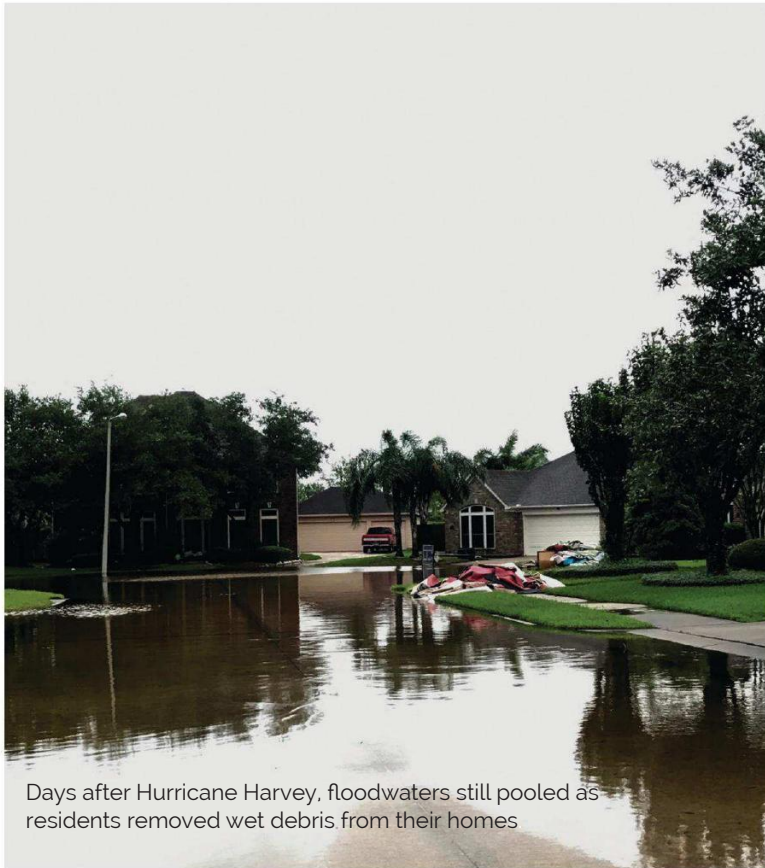
The City of League City continues to work with regional stakeholders to pursue new partnerships that will help secure this funding. Meanwhile, residents wait for shovel-ready projects. For many locals, solutions have been decades in the making.

A Community-Wide Spirit of Leadership

Back in the 1980s, two watershed steering committees were formed to address the flooding stemming from Clear Creek and Dickinson Bayou. Unfortunately, leadership was lacking, and committee activity waned over the years as they struggled to reconcile potential projects with their environmental impacts. It was only after Hurricane Harvey sparked a new sense of urgency that things began to pick up speed. During the months following the storm, League City residents led the way, proving that citizen engagement can result in significant movement. They spoke with councilmembers and other regional leaders, insisting their concerns be met with realistic solutions.

Peggy Zahler, a League City resident whose home flooded in Harvey, was one of the many locals who voiced their concerns at post-Harvey city council meetings. She was a key player in renewing the efforts of the steering committees. "Citizen engagement is so important, and when our voices are heard, change can happen," said Zahler. "With the involvement of city councilmembers seated on the steering committees, there has been considerable progress."

Two League City councilmembers—Hank Dugie and Larry Millican—were appointed to the watershed steering committees by Mayor Pat Hallisey shortly after Harvey. The committees provided a conduit for the dozens of entities within the Clear Creek and Dickinson Bayou regions to share information and discuss impactful solutions that could benefit everyone. "If we tried to address this issue alone, we wouldn't be successful," said Councilman Dugie. "The committees allow us to advocate together and get everyone on board."



Days after Hurricane Harvey, floodwaters still pooled as residents removed wet debris from their homes



A family kayaks around their rain-drenched neighborhood during Hurricane Harvey.



Flooding from Hurricane Harvey inundated surface streets in League City

Their work within each of the watershed steering committees provided much needed leadership and renewed energy. Their involvement resulted in the council adopting a discerning, level-headed approach to flood mitigation plans, which City Manager John Baumgartner has continuously worked to implement.

League City's community—from its residents to government officials—demonstrates that leadership isn't just about one person or one moment. It's a conscious decision to be deliberate and persistent in the face of monumental obstacles. It's a community attitude that refuses to give up. It's a contagious spirit that rallies the troops and brings people together to create change.

While League City and its neighbors still face enormous challenges—from securing hundreds of millions of dollars in funds to acquiring environmental and construction permits—the fruits of strong and effective leadership have been cultivated and continue to grow and produce results.

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